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Towards a regional dialogue in the Middle East: an Israeli perspective

Submission by Israel

1. Israel's long-held vision of a more secure and peaceful Middle East requires that all regional States engage in a process of direct and sustained dialogue to address the broad range of regional security challenges in the Middle East. Such a dialogue, based on the widely accepted principle of consensus, can only emanate from within the region and address in an inclusive manner the threat perceptions of all regional parties with a view to enhancing and improving their security. Direct contact, combined with trust and confidence-building, is an essential basis for the creation of a new security paradigm in a region that is increasingly fraught with wars, conflicts, disintegration of national territories and human suffering.

2. Accordingly, Israel agreed in 2011 to the request of the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Security Policy of Finland, Jaakko Laajava, to engage in consultations to advance a regional dialogue. Subsequently, Israel was the first country in the region to respond positively to Mr. Laajava's proposal in February 2013 to participate in multilateral consultations in Switzerland to discuss the arrangements and conditions necessary for convening a conference on establishing the Middle East as a zone free of all weapons of mass destruction and means of delivery. It took the Arab Group an additional eight months to agree to participate in the consultations.

3. Between October 2013 and June 2014, five rounds of multilateral consultations were held in Switzerland between Israel and several of its Arab neighbours. The central purpose of the meetings was to seek regional consensus on all the essential aspects of a conference in Helsinki, including the agenda, the concluding document and the necessary modalities. The consultations were conducted in a business-like manner and were the first direct engagement between Israel and its neighbours on this issue in more than 20 years, since the arms control and regional security process in the 1990s.

4. While not all regional States attended, the consultations presented an important opportunity for direct regional engagement. Indeed, Israel's participation at a senior and authoritative level in all the five meetings attested to the importance that Israel ascribed to the need to redefine a new regional security paradigm for the Middle East. During the consultations, Israel submitted, including in writing, some creative ideas and formulations that could advance consensus, as well as

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understandings and trust, between the regional parties. Indeed, Israel stated unequivocally, also in public, that, if agreement were reached on the agenda, the concluding document and terms of reference of a conference in Helsinki, the regional States could proceed to set a date for such an event.

5. In June 2014, the Arab representatives at the fifth round of consultations in Geneva felt that they required new instructions and in effect discontinued the talks. Since June 2014, Mr. Laajava has been attempting to convene a sixth round of consultations in Geneva. Israel responded positively on 20 October 2014 and 7 January 2015 to formal invitations in that regard. Despite Israel's positive attitude towards continued engagement, the sixth round of consultations in Geneva was postponed several times and was not held, preventing necessary progress towards a consensual agreement on a conference in Helsinki.

6. Regrettably, in recent years the Arab countries have preferred to focus their efforts on promoting contentious resolutions in the International Atomic Energy Agency General Conference and the First Committee of the General Assembly. That negative approach has reinforced the lack of trust and confidence and prevented a meaningful dialogue between the States of the Middle East.

7. Ultimately, it is difficult to understand how any disarmament, arms control and regional security issues can be addressed without any direct dialogue between the regional States, as the Group of Arab States suggests. Such strident opposition to conducting a direct dialogue with Israel, coupled with the demand that a conference be convened by a deadline on the basis of terms of reference conceived by one side only, underlines and reinforces the mistrust and suspicion between the States in the region. If a serious regional effort has not emerged in the Middle East during the past five years it is not because of Israel.

8. It should be emphasized that notions of direct engagement and consensus are fundamental norms in international diplomacy and have been accepted in other regions. In that context, the Group of Seven recently declared that: "The regional parties must engage actively with each other in order to reach consensus on a date and an agenda for the Helsinki Conference as soon as possible. We emphasize that the Conference can only lead to a meaningful process if the interests of all participants are taken into account."

9. To promote any significant regional security architecture in the Middle East, it is imperative that the regional States do not adopt positions that prevent the other side from participating in what should be an inclusive regional process between all relevant stakeholders. Decisions that seek to circumvent and substitute direct engagement or the building of trust and agreement among regional parties will neither assist a regional process nor hasten a successful outcome.

10. A meaningful process will require:

(a) That regional States assume responsibility for the promotion of a direct regional dialogue, without external auspices that do not emanate from the region;

(b) That regional States address the broad range of security challenges facing the region;

(c) That all decisions be reached by consensus between the regional parties.

11. Israel, for its part, will continue to adopt a positive and constructive approach towards a meaningful regional discussion that could lead to a more peaceful and secure Middle East free from wars, conflicts and all weapons of mass destruction.